



MADAM RIDES THE BUS

Vallikannan





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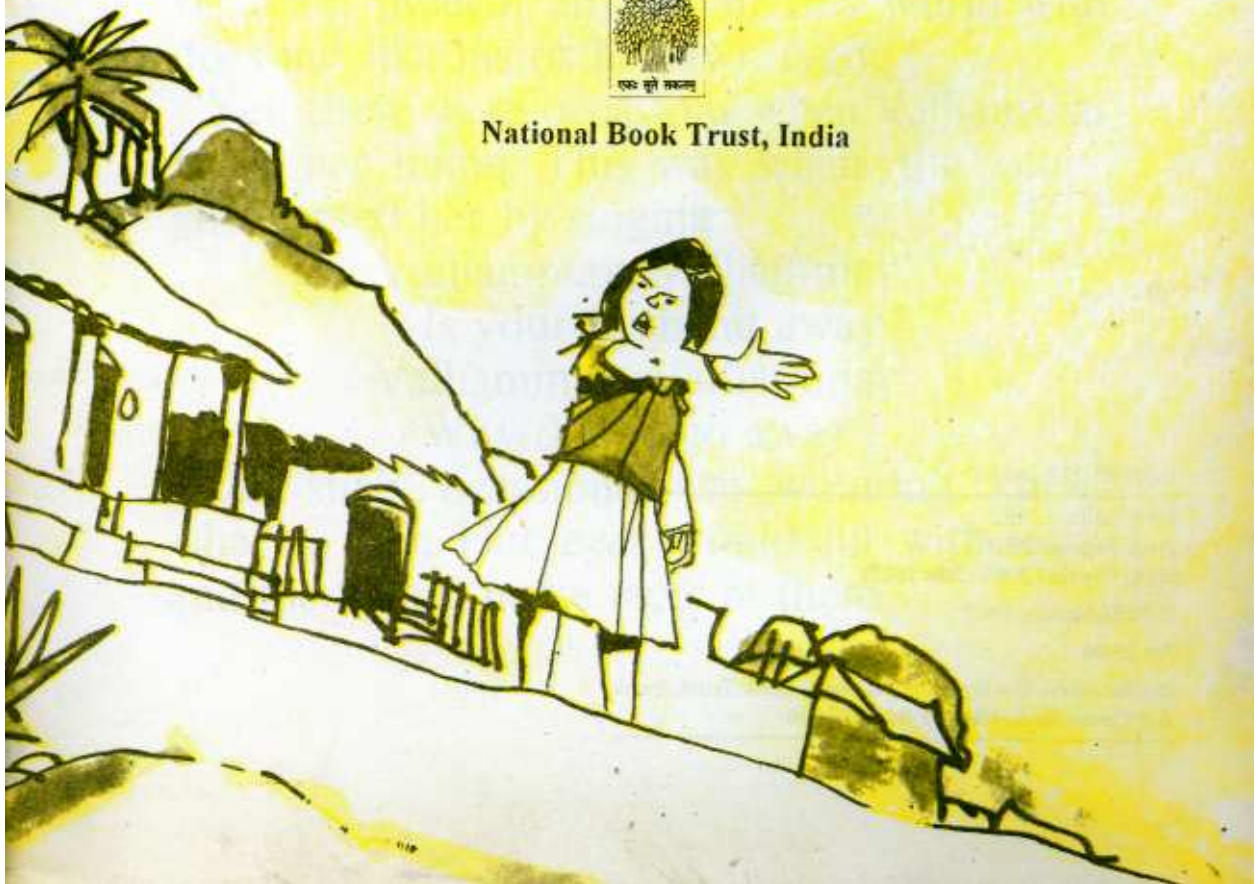
Vallikannan

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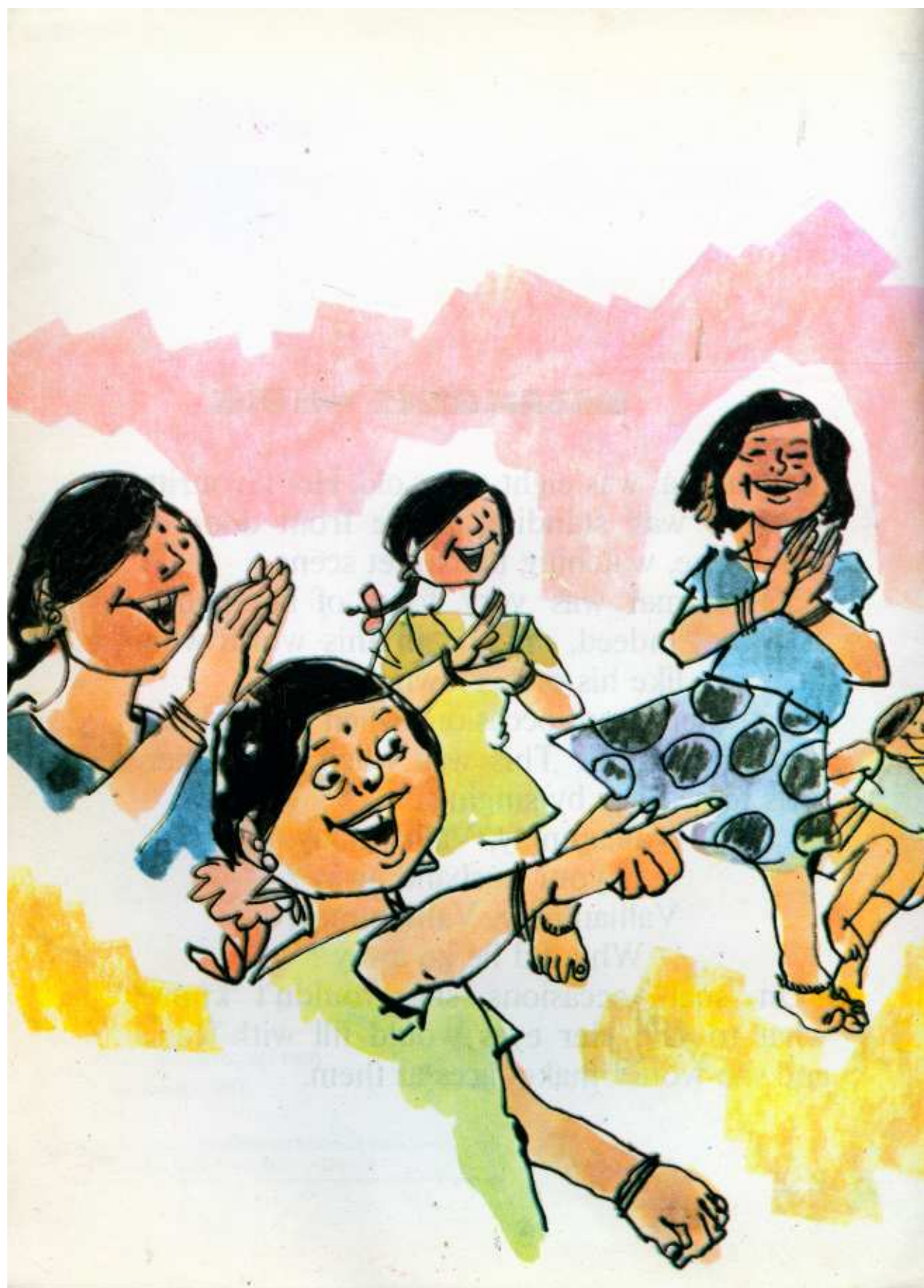
Valliammai was eight years old. Her favourite pastime was standing at the front door of her house, watching the street scene.

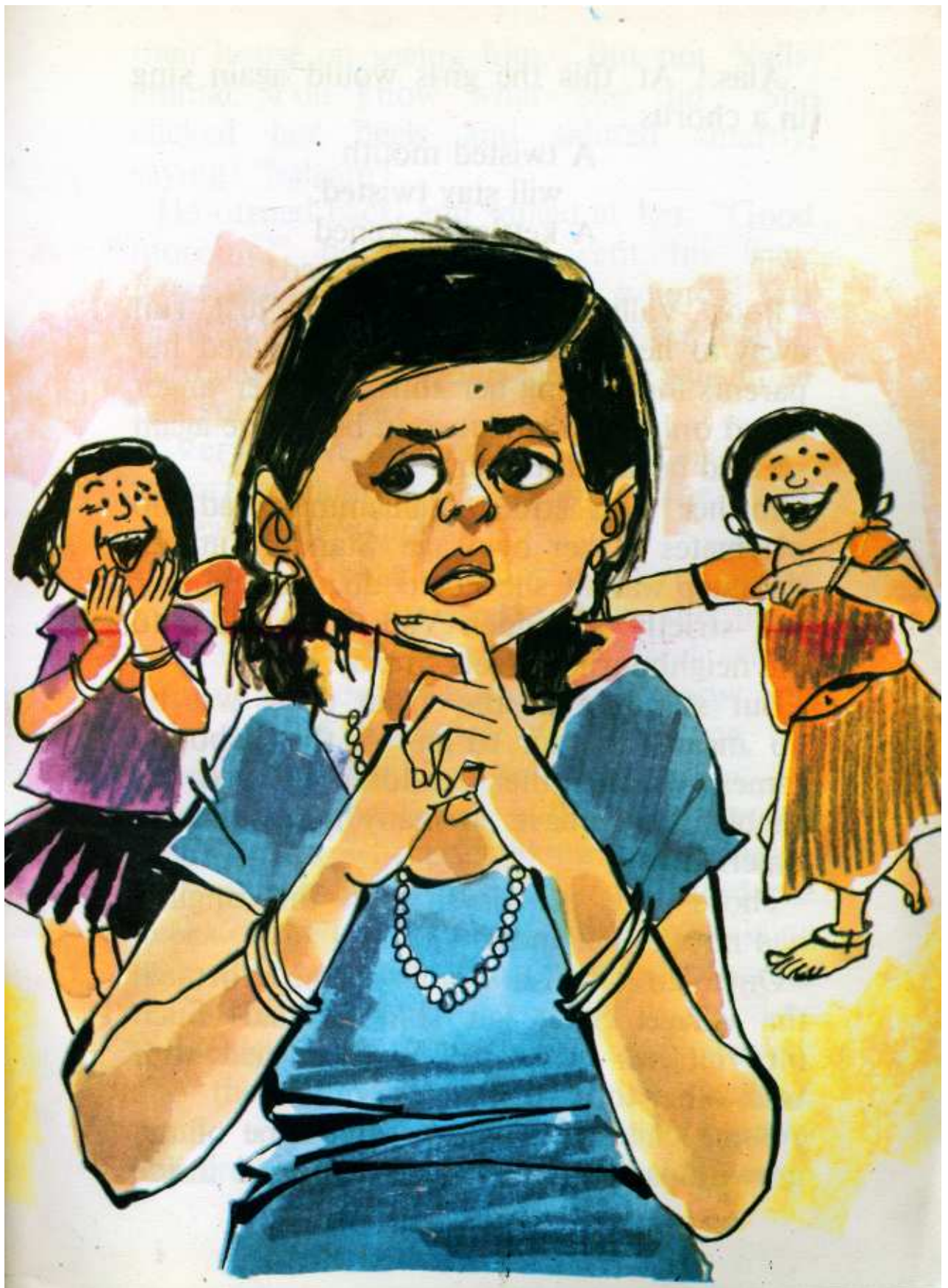
Valliammai was very fond of her name. Is there, indeed, anyone in this world who does not like his or her own name?

Yet, there were occasions when Valliammai hated her name. This was when the other girls teased her by singing:

Valliammay, Valliammay,
Is your husband away?
Valliammay, Valliammay,
Why did he go away?

On such occasions she wouldn't know what to say. Her eyes would fill with tears and she would make faces at them.





Alas ! At this the girls would again sing in a chorus :

A twisted mouth
will stay twisted;
A kettle blackened
will stay blackened !

Poor Valliammai would then just run away to her house, sobbing. She hated her parents for naming her thus. But her anger lasted only for a while; soon her name again seemed beautiful to her.

In her own street, Valliammai had no playmates of her own age. Standing at her doorstep was all she could do. Her mother had strictly forbidden Valli from going to the neighbouring streets to play.

But standing at the front door was by no means inferior to any of the elaborate games which other children played. It enabled her to have so many new, unusual experiences.

Those were the days when the English had not yet left India.

Once an English soldier passed through the village. Such fair skin he had! Such nice clothes he wore! Women vied with each other to have a glimpse of him.

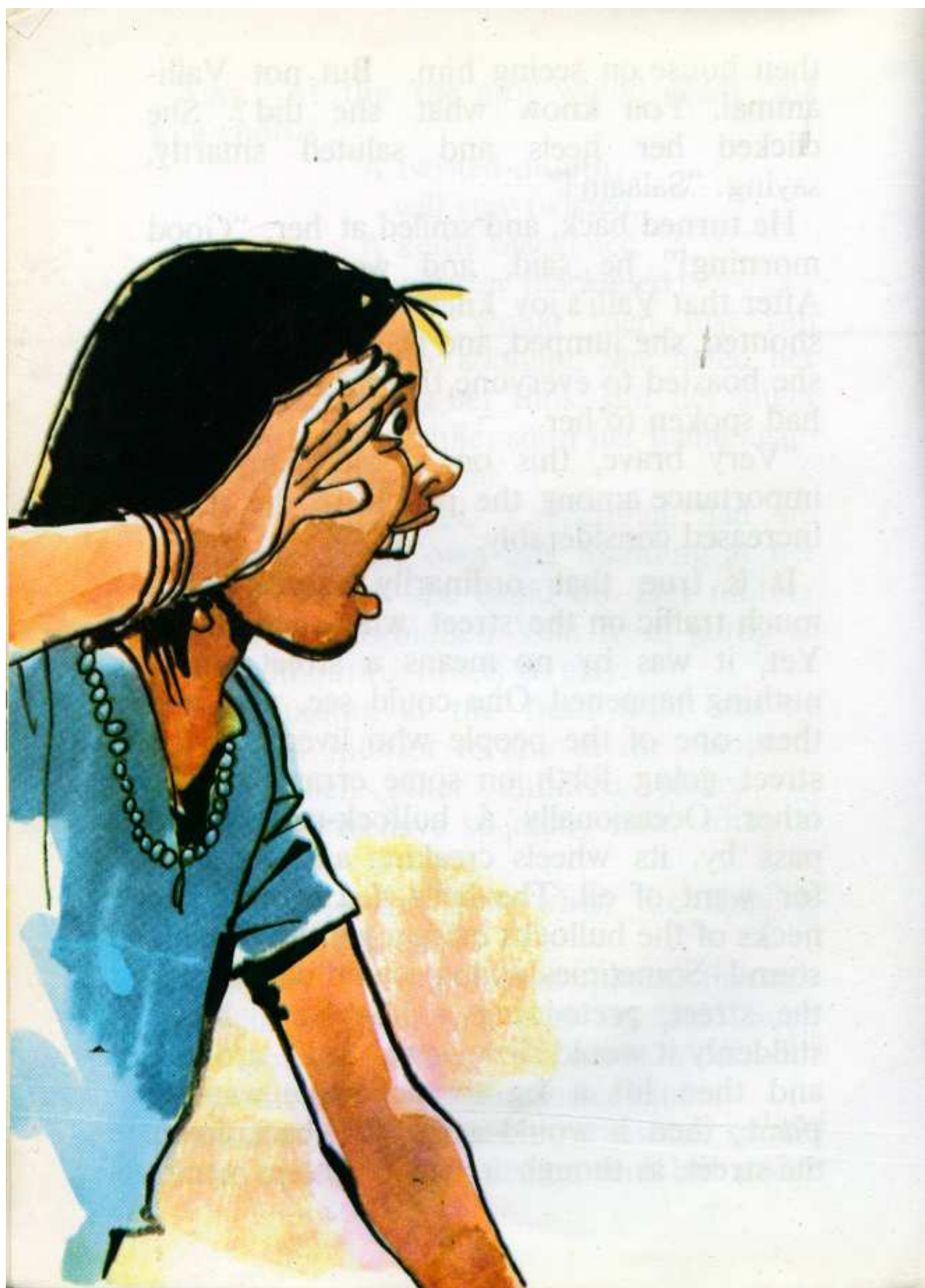
Some children, however, and some of the grown-ups too, were scared and hid inside

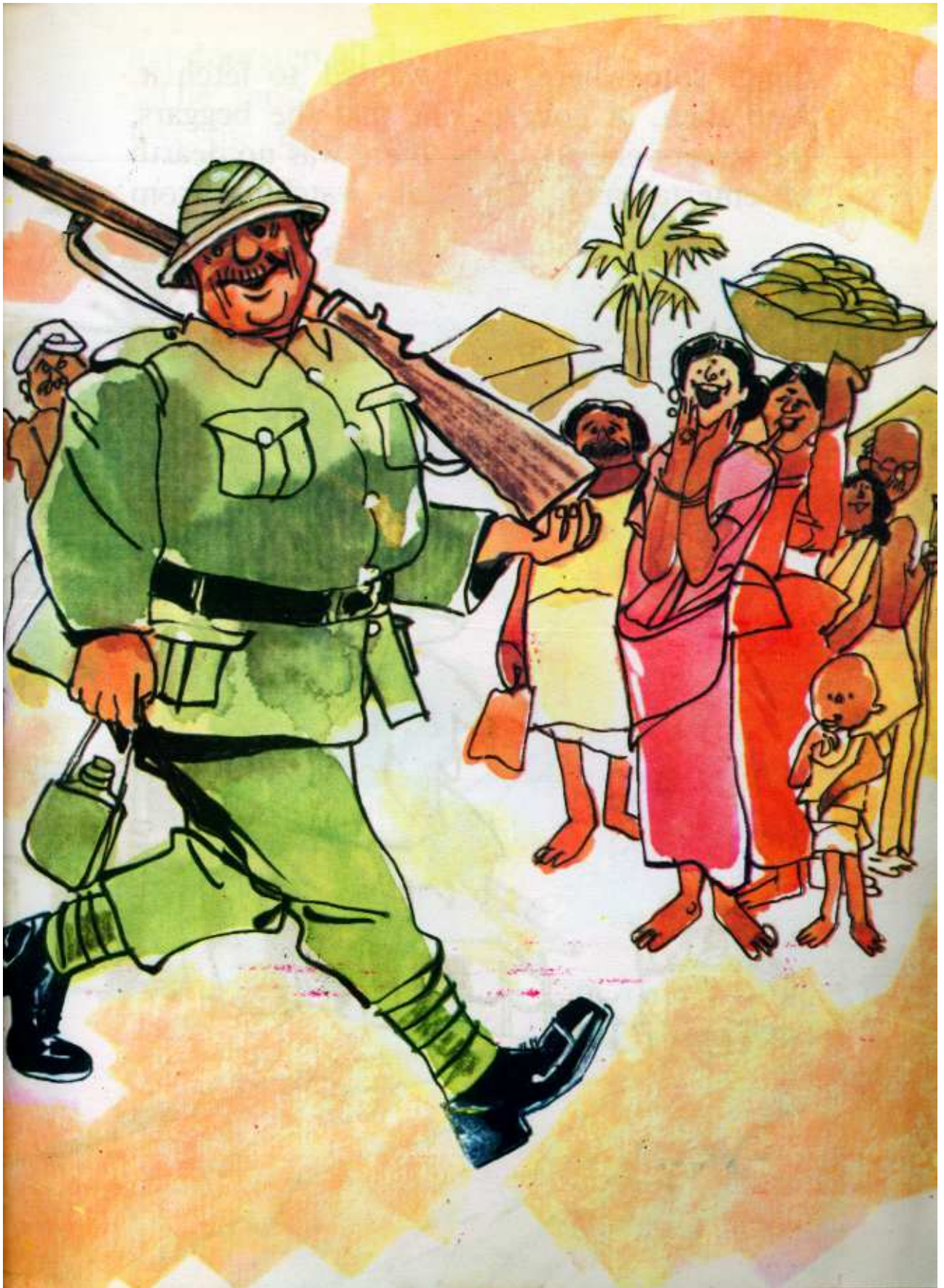
their house on seeing him. But not Valli-ammai. You know what she did? She clicked her heels and saluted smartly, saying: "Salaam!"

He turned back, and smiled at her. "Good morning!" he said, and went his way. After that Valli's joy knew no bounds! She shouted, she jumped, and she danced about; she boasted to everyone that an Englishman had spoken to her.

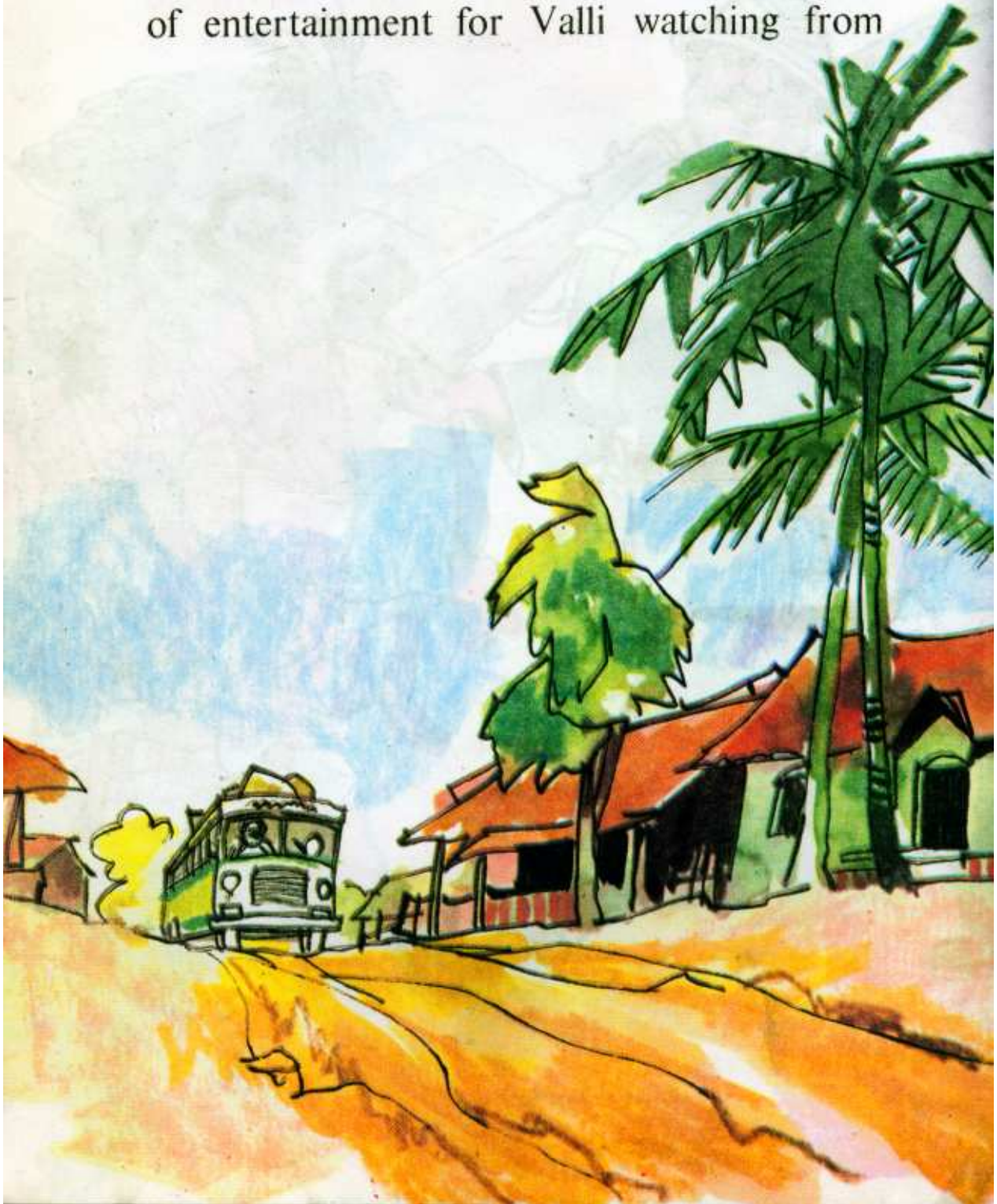
"Very brave, this one!" said many. Her importance among the people in the street increased considerably.

It is true that ordinarily there wasn't much traffic on the street where she lived. Yet, it was by no means a street where nothing happened. One could see, now and then, one of the people who lived on the street going forth on some errand or the other. Occasionally a bullock-cart would pass by, its wheels creaking and groaning for want of oil. The bells tied around the necks of the bullocks made a gentle, tinkling sound. Sometimes a dog would dart across the street, pretending to be very busy; suddenly it would slow down, sniff around, and then lift a leg to wet some wayside plant; then it would again rush back down the street, as though it had forgotten some-





thing, somewhere, and wanted to fetch it. And then, of course, one had the beggars, the street-vendors. Yes, there was no dearth of entertainment for Valli watching from



her doorstep all day long.

The most fascinating thing on the street was the town bus, which passed by every



hour, once going up and once going down. The sight of the bus, filled each time with a new set of passengers was a source of unending joy to Valliammai.

She watched it, day after day, and one day a tiny wish entered her tiny head : she wanted to ^{be} ride in the bus, at least once. The wish grew and grew, till it became very strong. Valli would look wistfully at the people who got on or off the bus when it stopped at the street corner. Their faces would kindle in her a hundred odd longings, dreams and expectations. Whenever any of her friends boasted to her about travelling to the city in the bus and tried to describe the sights there, Valli felt extremely jealous. "Proud ! Proud !" she would shout, in English. Though Valli and her friends did not understand the meaning of the word, they used it freely.

Over many days and months Valli listened carefully to the conversations between the occasional visitors to the town from her village and the regular bus-goers—talk about the various small details connected with the bus journey. She also learnt a few things by asking some of them questions.

The city was six miles from her village. The bus fare, one-way, was thirty paise, so it

came to sixty paise in all, both ways. The bus took about fortyfive minutes to reach the city. On reaching the city, if she remained sitting in the bus and paid another thirty paise, she could return home in the same bus. That is, if she left her village at 1 o'clock she could be in town at 1.45. And back in her village, by the same bus, around 2.45 p.m. . . .

In this way, she went on calculating and re-calculating, planning and re-planning. . . .

One day as the bus was crossing the village border and entering the main highway, a small voice was heard shouting: "Stop the bus! Stop the bus!" And a tiny hand was stretched out.

The bus slowed down. The conductor looked out, and said somewhat irritably: "Well, who wants to come? Ask them to hurry up, will you?"

"Stop the bus ! I want to come!" said Valli.

"Oh, really! You don't say!" exclaimed the conductor.

"All I know is I have to go to town and here's your fare," she said, and showed him the change.

"O.K., O.K., get in first," said the conductor; he gently lifted her up into the bus.

"Tch ! I am climbing in myself. Why should



you lift me?"

The conductor was a jolly sort. "Oh, Madam, don't be angry, please be seated here. . . ." he said. "Everybody make way please, Madam is coming."



It was the slack hour for traffic, and there were only about six or seven passengers on the bus. They were all staring at Valli, and they laughed at the conductor's words.

Valli became self-conscious; she walked quickly with averted eyes towards a vacant seat and sat down.

"May we start, Madam?" asked the conductor, smiling. He blew his whistle twice. The bus roared and moved forward.

It was a brand new bus. It was painted white on the outside, with a few green stripes. Inside, the overhead bars shone like silver. Right in front, facing her, was a beautiful clock. The seats were soft and luxurious.

Valli gobbled everything up with her eyes. The canvas hanging outside the windows partially hid her view; so she stood up on the seat and kept staring out.

The bus was now travelling along the bank of a canal. It was a very narrow strip of road. On one side was the canal, and beyond it acres and acres of green fields. Green, green, green, as far as the eye could see.

Oh, it was all so wonderful!

Suddenly a voice spoke and she was startled.

"Listen child!" the voice said, "Don't stand like that. Sit down."

She sat down, and saw who it was. It was an elderly gentleman, who had spoken out of concern. But his words irritated her.

"Nobody is a child here," she said. "I have paid the full fare."

The conductor, too, intervened: "Oh, this is a big Madam, sir. Could a child ever pay her own fare and travel to the town on her own?"

Valli shot an angry glance at him and said: "I am not a madam, remember. And you've not given me my ticket, yet."

"Remember," the conductor said, mimicking her tone, and everyone laughed. She too joined in the laughter.

The conductor punched a ticket and handed it to her. "Sit comfortably. Why do you have to stand after paying for your seat?"

"I like it better," she said.

"If you stand, you may fall and hurt yourself when the bus takes a sharp turn, or if there's a sudden jerk. . . that's why I asked you to sit, child."

"I'm not a child, I tell you," she said, irritably. "I'm eight years old."

"Of course, of course. How stupid of me. EIGHT YEARS! My!"

The bus stopped, some new passengers entered, and the conductor got busy for a





while. Valli sat down, afraid of losing her seat. An elderly woman came and sat near her. "Going alone, dear?" she asked Valli, as the bus started. Valli found her absolutely repulsive—such big holes she had in her ears,

and such ugly looking ornaments in them; the smell of tobacco from her mouth, and the betel juice which threatened to spill out any moment—ugh!

“Yes, I am going alone. And I have got my ticket,” she said, very curt and dignified.

“Yes, going to town, she is. Thirty paise ticket,” said the conductor.

“Oh, why don’t you mind your own business,” Valli retorted. But she laughed all the same.

And the conductor laughed too.

“Is it proper for one so young to come out alone?” the old woman continued her drivel.

“Do you know where you have to go in the town? Which street? Which house?”

“You need not bother about that. I know everything,” Valli said. And she turned her face towards the window, and started looking out.

This was her first journey. . . . Oh, what careful, painstaking plans she had had to make for this journey! She had to carefully collect all the stray coins that came her way—resisting the impulse to spend them on peppermints, toys, balloons, and so on—till they added up to sixty paise. It was indeed a great ordeal; particularly one day at the village fair when she had to stifle a strong

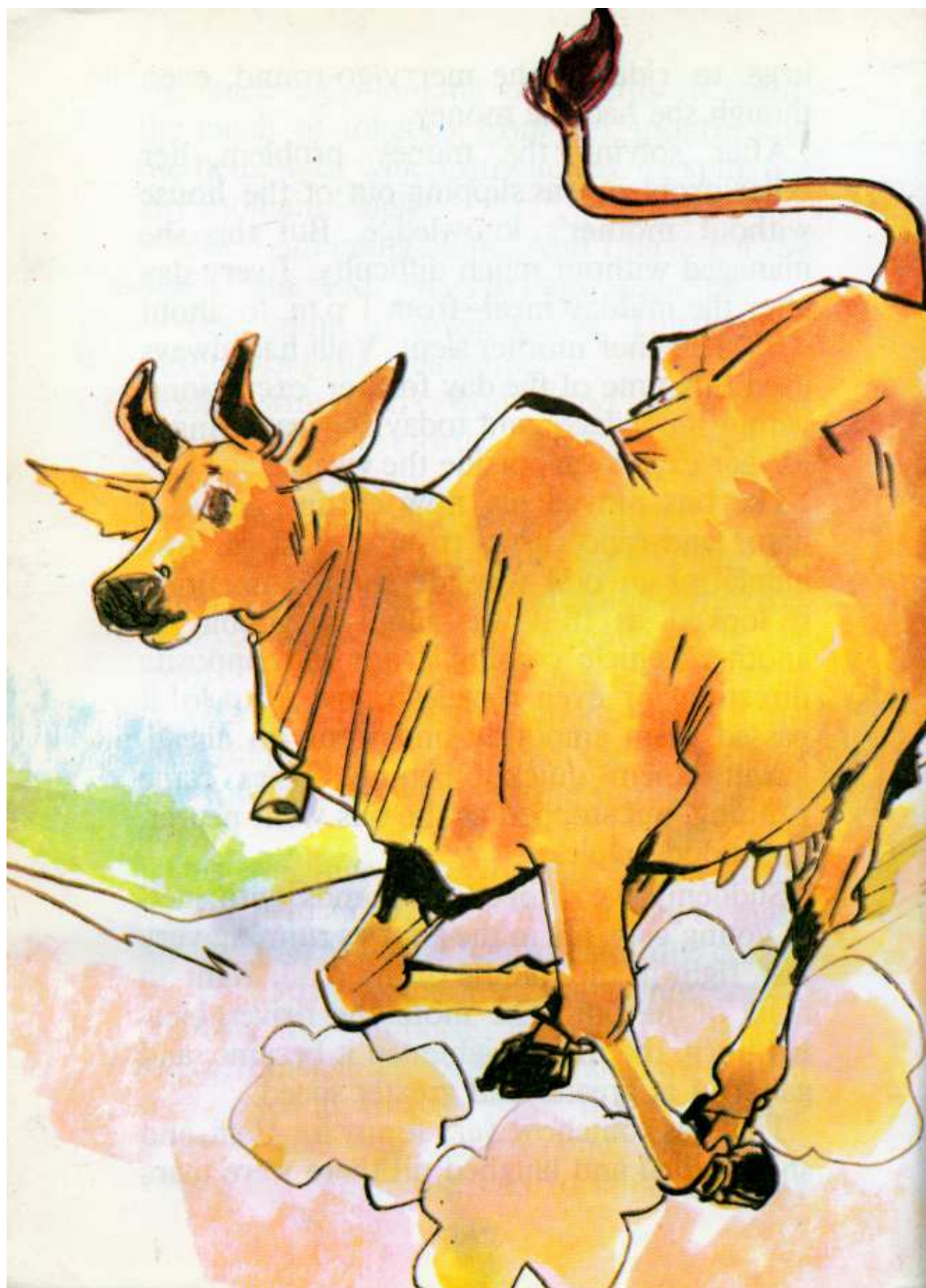
urge to ride on the merry-go-round, even though she had the money.

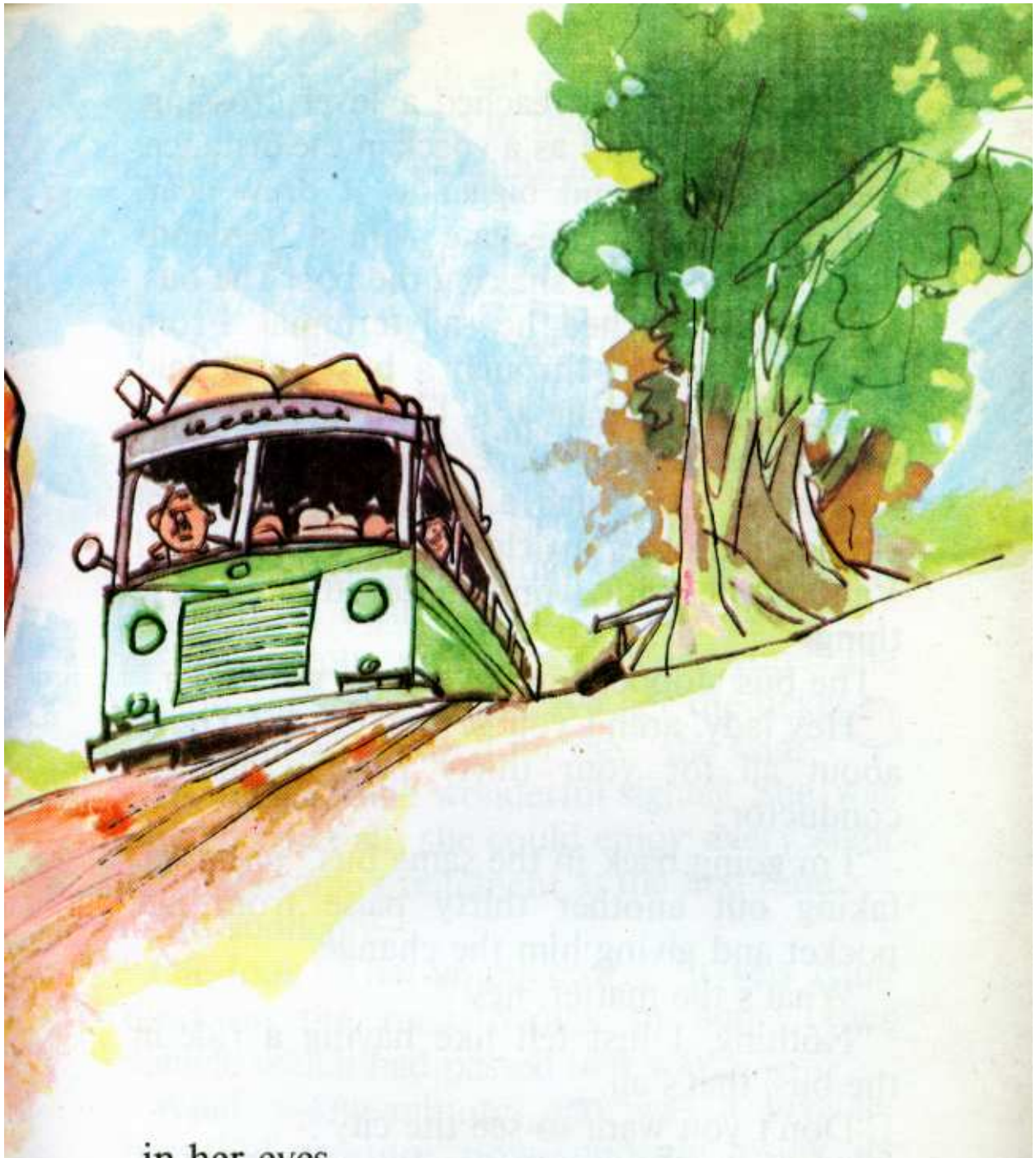
After solving the money problem, her other problem was slipping out of the house without mother's knowledge. But this she managed without much difficulty. Every day after the midday meal—from 1 p.m. to about 4 or 4.30—her mother slept. Valli had always used this time of the day for her 'excursions' within the village; and today she was using it for her excursion outside the village!

The bus moved on, now cutting across a bare landscape, now rushing past a tiny hamlet or an odd wayside shop. Sometimes it looked as if it was about to gobble up another vehicle coming from the opposite direction, or even a pedestrian. . . but lo! it passed them smoothly and went on ahead, leaving them quickly behind. Trees came running, but stopped as the bus went nearer, and stood helpless.

Suddenly she clapped her hands with glee. A young cow, tail in the air, was running very fast, right in the middle of the road, right in front of the bus. The more the driver blew his horn, the more frightened it became, and galloped at greater and greater speed.

This was somehow very funny for Valli, and she laughed and laughed till there were tears





in her eyes.

“Hey, that’s enough lady!” the conductor said. “Keep some for tomorrow.”

At last the cow moved away.

And then the bus reached a level crossing. The train appeared as a speck in the distance, became bigger and bigger as it drew near, and rushed past the gate with a tremendous roar and rattle, shaking the bus. The bus, moving on, reached the rail terminal. From there it travelled through a busy, well laid out shopping avenue and, turning, entered a still larger thoroughfare. Such big, bright looking shops! Such a glittering display of clothes and other articles! Such a big crowd! Valli, dumb with wonder, gaped at everything.

The bus stopped, and everyone got down.

"Hey lady, aren't you getting down? That's about all for your thirty paise," said the conductor.

"I'm going back in the same bus," she said, taking out another thirty paise from her pocket and giving him the change.

"What's the matter, hey?"

"Nothing. I just felt like having a ride in the bus, that's all."

"Don't you want to see the city?"

"Alone? Oh, mother... I'm afraid," she said. Her tone and gesture amused him no end.

"But you weren't afraid to come in the bus," he said.

"Nothing to be afraid of in that," she said.

"Just get down, go to that restaurant there, and have coffee. Nothing to be afraid of."

"Oh, no. I can't!"

"Well, then, should I get you some *pakoda* or *mixture*?"

"No, I have no money for all that. Just give me a ticket, that's all."

"You need not give me any money. I'll get you some."

"No, no please, no," she said firmly.

At the scheduled time the bus started. Again there wasn't much of a crowd.

"Won't your mother search for you?" the conductor asked, as he gave her the ticket.

"No one will search for me," she said.

Again the same wonderful sights! She was not bored at all; she could enjoy every sight with the same excitement as the first time . . .

But suddenly—

Oh, look! That young cow . . . it was lying dead on the road. Struck by some other vehicle which had passed that way.

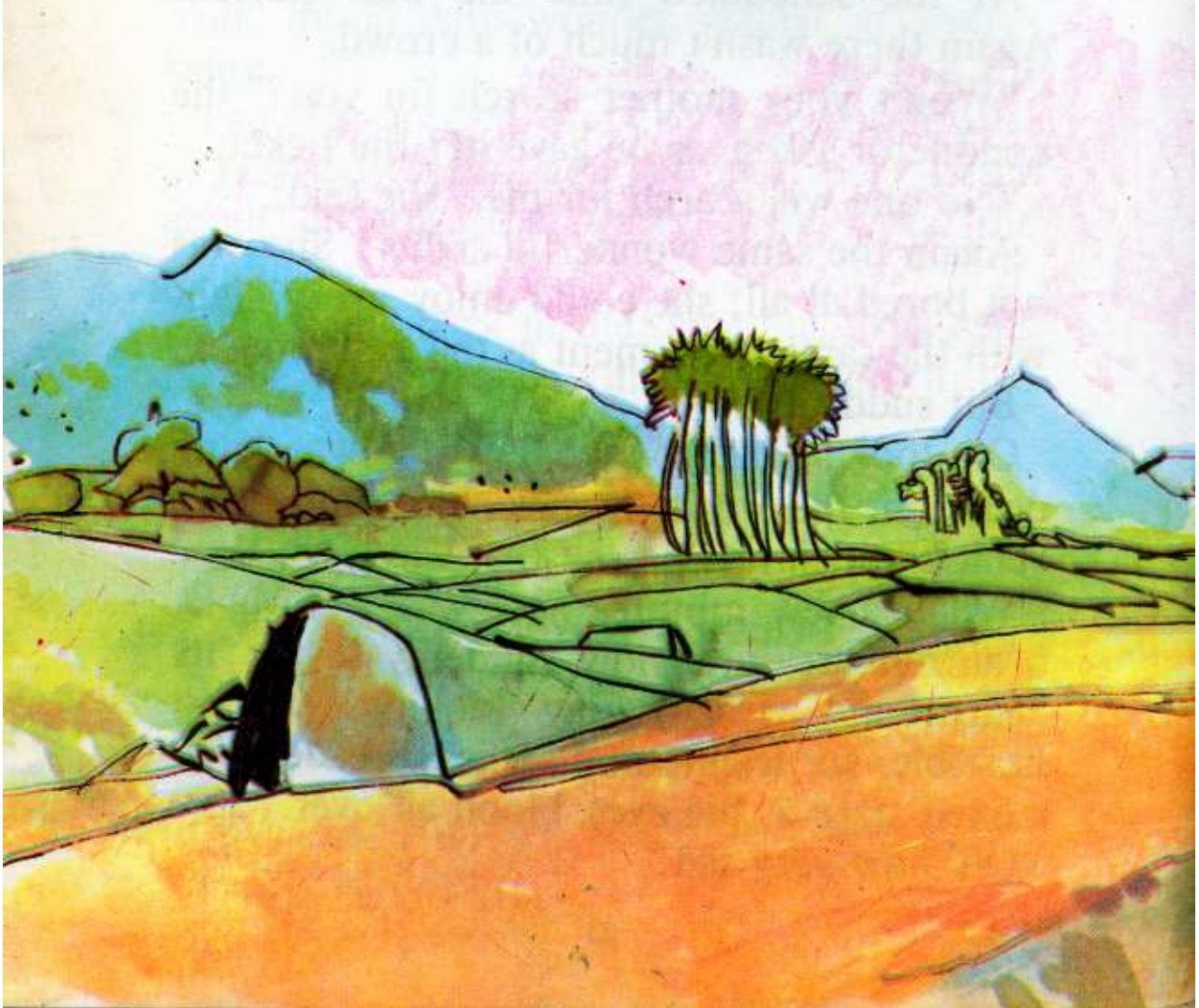
What, a few minutes ago, was a lovable, beautiful creature, now suddenly losing its charm and vivacity, lay looking, oh, so horrible, so frightening—legs spreadeagled, a fixed stare in the eyes, blood all over . . .

Oh, how very sad!

"The same cow which ran ahead of us,
when we were coming, conductor?" she
asked.

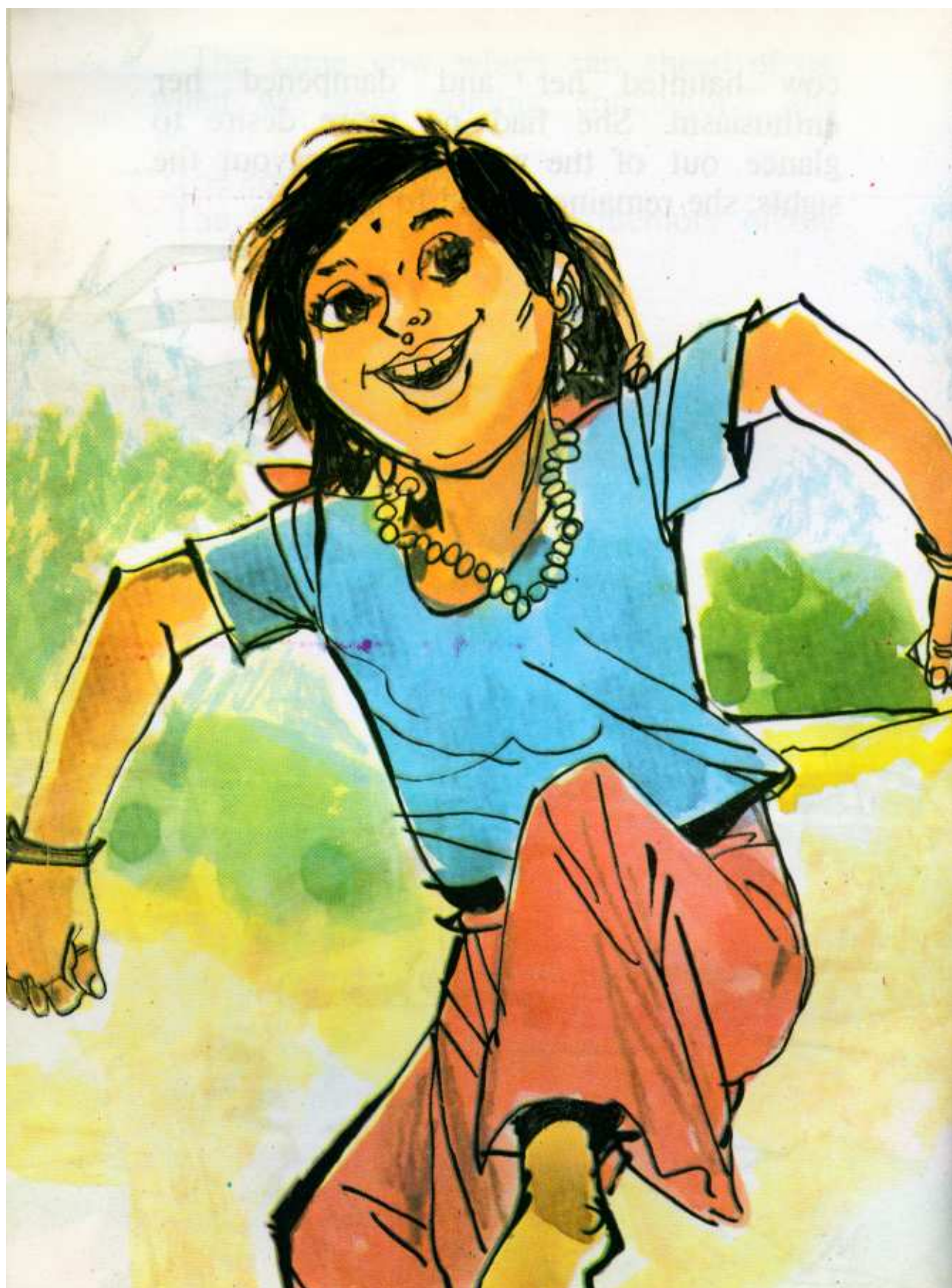
The conductor nodded.

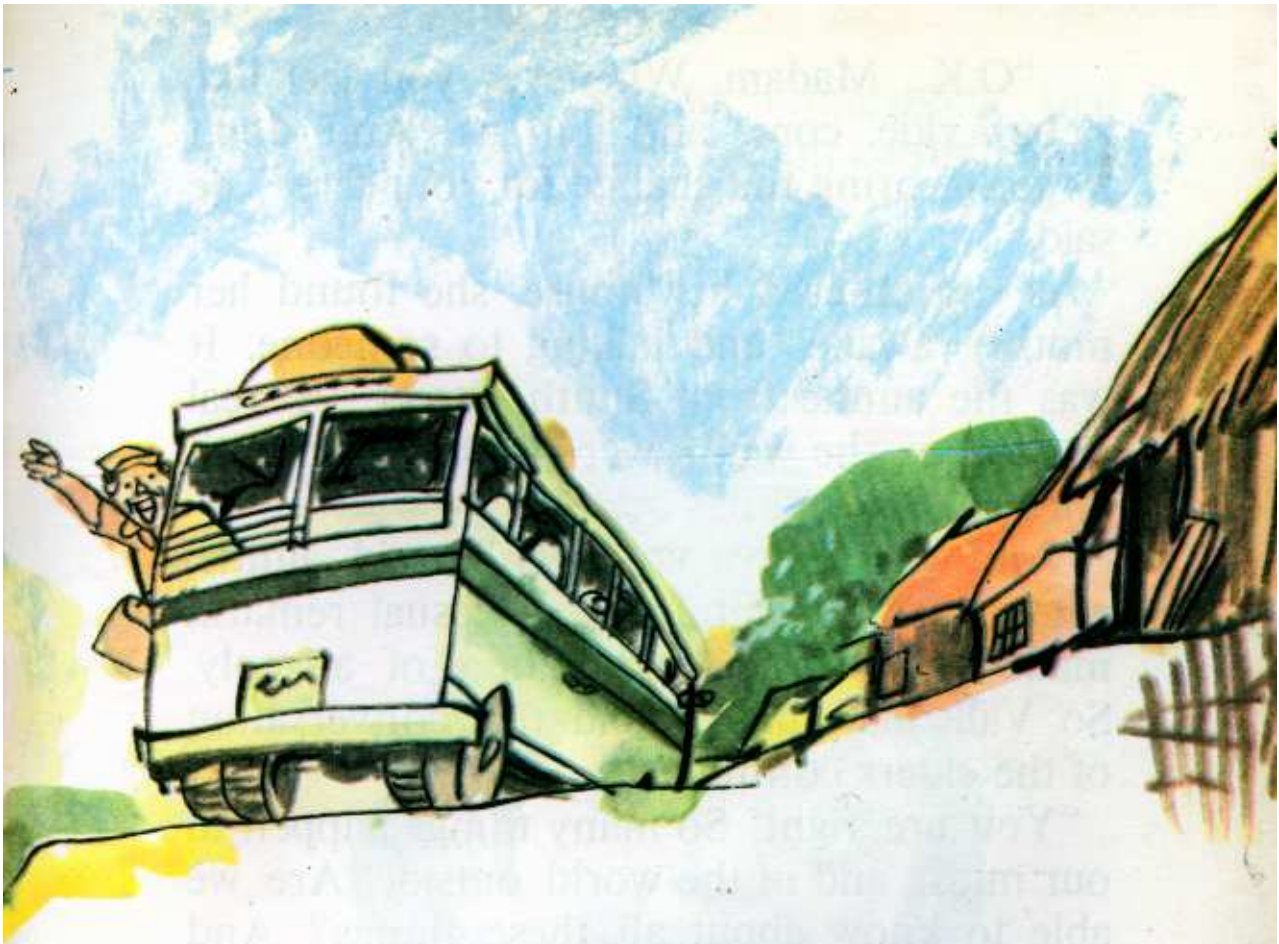
The bus moved on. The memory of the



cow haunted her and dampened her enthusiasm. She had no more desire to glance out of the window and savour the sights; she remained glued to her seat.







The bus reached her village at 3.40.

Valli stood up, yawned and stretched herself, and said goodbye to the conductor: "Well, see you then, sir."

"O.K., Madam. Whenever you feel like a bus ride, come and join us. And don't forget to bring the change for your fare," he said.

As she entered her house, she found her mother awake, and talking to someone. It was the auntie from South Street. A real chatterbox she was, never closing her mouth once she opened it. . . .

"And where have *you* been?" said auntie, when she saw Valli. It was a casual remark, made without the expectation of a reply. So Valli just smiled; and the conversation of the elders continued. . . .

"You are right. So many things happen in our midst, and in the world outside. Are we able to know about all these things? And even when we think we know about something, are we able to understand it completely?" Valli's mother was saying.

"Yeah!" Valli said.

"What's that?" her mother asked.

"I was agreeing with what you said about things happening without our knowledge."

"A chit of a girl, she is, and yet look how she pokes her nose in the conversation of elders, as though she was a big lady!" said auntie.

Valli smiled to herself. She had no great

desire that they should understand that smile. In any case, they couldn't ever, could they?









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